



# “What should I say to my employer... if anything?”- My disability disclosure dilemma

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**“What should I say to my employer... if anything?”- My disability disclosure dilemma**

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“What should I say to my employer... if anything?”-

My disability disclosure dilemma

**Purpose:** The aim of this paper is to explore the key issues surrounding teacher/staff disability disclosures in the UK’s Further Education (FE) sector.

**Design/methodology/approach:** Fifteen semi-structured interviews were conducted in a medium sized FE college (case-study) setting in the South East of England. To compare the experiences, views and perceptions of leaders, managers and teachers, interviews were carried out with leaders and managers who are accountable for ensuring disability legislation is adhered to, and with teachers who are responsible for complying with equality and disability legislation. The fifteen interviewees who volunteered to take part in this research represent the various layers of the organisational structure and different academic departments in the College.

**Findings:** Two major themes discussed include: (a) the desire for teaching staff to ‘come out’ and make a disability disclosure, also; (b) the perception of disability as a ‘deficit’. A number of staff who disclosed their hidden disabilities stated they wouldn’t do so again. In order to avoid the negative side effects, developing a ‘culture of disability disclosure’ and providing long term employer support is required.

**Research limitations/implications:** This is an exploratory qualitative case study that highlights some of the key issues from a teacher/staff perspective. It is not meant to be generalisable research, but the ideas therein should help to develop a wider (empirical) research agenda.

**Originality/value:** There is an abundance of critical and sociological research concerning disability disclosure in general; there are also a number of scholarly studies that focus on disability issues from the student perspective. However, this is the first scholarly study that explores key issues involving FE staff.

**Keywords:** disability disclosure; labelling theory; ableism; further education; teachers.

**Paper type:** Case Study

## Introduction

This study explores the issue of teacher ‘*disability disclosure*’ – in a UK Further Education (FE) case-based setting. Whilst there is an abundance of literature about how disabilities might impact upon the rights and inclusion prospects of FE students (see Harris and Oppenheim, 2003; Armstrong and Humphrey, 2009; Nelson and Liebel, 2017), much less has been written about how disability issues are affecting (UK) teaching staff (Nalavany *et al.*, 2017). Furthermore, while there have been some studies involving the experiences of trainee teachers with learning disabilities, insufficient research has been conducted around the experiences of teachers with disabilities once they qualify, or have been contractually employed (O’Dwyer and Thorpe, 2013). For example, Riddick (2003) suggests that previous scholarly research hasn’t sufficiently explored the issue of dyslexia; neither the contributions of qualified teachers who have dyslexia, nor the nature of employer-employee relationships as a result of disclosing their learning difficulties.

Following the research conducted by O’Dwyer and Thorpe (2013), this article investigates how disclosing a visible or invisible disability might affect teachers in a typical UK (FE) organisational case study setting. The central research question (RQ) asks:

***(RQ) what are the key issues associated with disability disclosure from an FE teacher/staff perspective?***

As part of addressing the RQ, this article will necessarily analyse the views of both FE teachers and managers, concerning how disability disclosure might affect working relationships, as well opportunities for career advancement.

## Literature Review

### *'Labelling theory' – a negative perspective*

The lack of disclosure by teaching staff indicates they often feel the need to hide their disability(s) during the recruitment process and throughout the rest of their employment (Riddick, 2003). Throughout history, society has largely viewed having disability as a 'problem' (Proctor, 1995). Valle et al. (2004) describe being labelled '*learning disabled*' as being publicly revealed; thus, different from the norm and standing out in a negative way from others. The way a person perceives, or internalises a label can be influenced by how society interprets that label (Oliver, 1990; Thomas, 2004). When applied to FE teachers, Becker's (1963) '*labelling theory*' suggests that many teachers will be afraid to disclose their disability, in case it negatively affects their work relationships and career prospects. Needels and Schmitz (2006) allude to an underlying employer belief that staff with a disability are less productive than those without a disability. This form of discrimination and social prejudice is often referred to as '*ableism*' (see Valle *et al.*, 2004). Valle et al. (2004), Delpit (2001) and Sedgwick (1990) also refer to disability non-disclosure as '*the closet*', in that some employees will feel the need to hide their disability in order to remain safe, and feel unashamed in the workplace.

Cunningham et al. (2004), Taylor et al. (2010) and Fevre et al. (2013) suggest it is now part of a much wider problem, in that many organisations appear to treat long term sickness (for example) like a disciplinary matter. Fevre et al. (2013) go on to suggest that employees with a disability feel particularly vulnerable regarding their post-disclosure treatment in the workplace. For example, in a recent survey of employees with a disability, nearly a quarter had experienced long-term adverse repercussions as a consequence of their disclosure (von Schrader *et al.*, 2014). De Beer et al. (2014) found that following the disclosure of dyslexia, the attitudes of others were not always positive. In addition,

Singleton's Report (1999) into dyslexia in higher education (HE) in England and Wales estimated that as many as half of teacher training applicants with dyslexia didn't declare their disability during their application process, due to fears of not being accepted.

Therefore, based on the above research, we developed an initial interlinked proposition:

***(P1a) disability disclosure is unlikely in many cases, and; (P1b) fear of negative work-place consequences tend to remain following disability disclosure.***

### ***Counteracting labelling – affirming a ‘culture of disability disclosure’***

The alternative view (in theory) suggests that formal disability disclosure is a positive move. It should be an effective long term personal strategy for teachers – *i.e. if managed properly*. Disclosure could properly address staff needs, and allow teachers to gain sufficient access to resources, reasonable adjustments and organisational support. Ideally of course, it is important for FE employers to be aware of staff fears regarding work-place discrimination after disability disclosure. School/college managers should also be sensitive to common issues such as: (a) employee anxieties around disclosure and confidentiality arrangements; (b) potential for stigmatisation at work, and fear of negative reaction among colleagues; (c) threatened job-identity or work-place status; (d) potential loss of future opportunities for career advancement (Wilton, 2006; Moloney *et al.*, 2019).

It is vital for staff with disabilities to feel confident and comfortable enough to be open about their disability in the workplace, and to have their needs addressed properly by the human resources (HR) department and line managers alike (Wilton, 2006; Sanderson, 2011). For example, Smith (2002) suggests that all employers should consult with employees who have a disability to determine how best to support them. Kirby and Gibbon (2018) advocate disclosure as a first step in a proper process of dialogue; disclosure also

acknowledges that the needs of employees with disabilities should be respected and reviewed regularly. In many cases, effective work-place accommodations and/or reasonable adjustments can be made relatively quickly. However, disability disclosure also requires an effective employer communications strategy (von Schrader *et al.*, 2014). This helps to create an inclusive and safe environment for all staff; proffering supportive arrangements and communicating disability friendly work-practices over the longer term. For a proactive employer, this should involve clear signposting, and encouraging a culture of disability disclosure, as well as nurturing staff collegiality in the aftermath (Wilton, 2006; Prince, 2017).

In practice however, staff disability disclosure is often a complex affair. It requires strong HR leadership and sustained action on the part of senior management (Beyer and Kilsby, 1997; Wilton, 2006; von Schrader *et al.*, 2014). Some employees for example, will openly disclose visible disabilities upfront during the application and recruitment stages; or formally disclose after something happens during their contractual employment, such as a physical injury or acquired physical disability (e.g. sight or hearing loss). In other cases, invisible disabilities, or illnesses can go undetected for months (even years) without employers or colleagues realising that disability support interventions are required (Wilton, 2006; von Schrader *et al.*, 2014). This highlights a need for great awareness training and affirmative action on the part of employers (Fevre *et al.*, 2013). It is also important to recognise and develop an open disability disclosure culture, and thus disavow a climate of personal fear and uncertainty that afflicts so many teaching staff (Fevre *et al.*, 2013; Prince, 2017).

As a relevant example, in her article '*Shedding Light on a Hidden Disability*', Sanderson (2011) refers to dyslexia as a '*hidden*' disability and advocates dyslexia-awareness training for all employees. She suggests it is important that teaching colleagues, as well as



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2  
3 leaders and managers have a proper understanding of dyslexia, to ensure that sufficient  
4  
5 collegial support can be provided. Sanderson (2011) suggests that many organisations are  
6  
7 unaware of the impact dyslexia can have on employees' ability to accomplish their  
8  
9 responsibilities and work to their full potential. Sanderson (2011) also proposes that line  
10  
11 managers could, for example, attend dyslexia-awareness seminars and receive coaching in  
12  
13 how to work with dyslexic individuals to ensure that they gain an awareness of the tools that  
14  
15 can level the playing field and equip employees with dyslexia to perform at their best.  
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18  
19 Based on this view, we develop a second, more positively oriented proposition that  
20  
21 affirms a 'culture of disability disclosure' in the work-place, namely:  
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26 *(P2a) proper disability disclosure will help employees feel better about their work-*  
27  
28 *place relationships, and; (P2b) proper disability disclosure helps employers to offer*  
29  
30 *and provide much needed employee support.*  
31  
32

## 33 34 35 **Research Design and Methodology**

36  
37 A qualitative case study approach was adopted as this is a relatively innovative area of  
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39 research. Kyburz-Graber (2004) suggests that case studies are increasingly used in  
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41 educational research intended to describe context specific educational situations and to draw  
42  
43 conclusions by generalising from findings. A case study method permits participants to  
44  
45 discuss their views within a shared organisational context giving a multi-perspectival  
46  
47 analysis. This method allows us to consider not only the perspective and voice of actors, but  
48  
49 additionally the pertinent group of actors and the communication among them (Tellis, 1997).  
50  
51 Tellis (1997) proposes that a case study is a triangulated research strategy that confirms the  
52  
53 validity of the process and gives a voice to the powerless and voiceless. Eisenhardt (1989)  
54  
55 and Denscombe (2007) suggest that case studies can draw on interpretations, reveal the  
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dynamics of complex states and aid with the process of conceptualisation. According to Collis and Hussey (2009) case studies are useful for understanding phenomena within a specific context.

Semi-structured interviews of fifteen individuals in a single organisation were carried out over a six week period from May 2019 – June 2019 to draw out individual experiences, outlooks and perceptions. According to Reid et al. (2005) in one unit of case study analysis, fifteen interviews are sufficient to examine and reflect upon key dynamics. In a larger sample, insight and reflections could become too intricate to develop significant understandings. The use of semi-structured interviews was advocated by Denscombe (2007) because semi-structured interviews permit the participant to speak openly on the issues with the intention to discover their lived experiences and views. According to Bowden et al. (2015), interviews permit the researcher to reach inferences that are recognisable and explicit within a research context and sampling frame. Eisenhardt (1989) proposes that the method of interviewing should be iterative, with better understanding developing as every interview advances and is reflected upon. The iterative nature of the methodology permits a deep, thoughtful analysis of the participant discourse. It is important to note that interviewing within a single longitudinal case study setting, such as a FE provider, is not intended to support theoretical generalisations. Instead, the purpose is to categorise thoughts, reflect upon key propositions (P1ab) & (P2ab) and recognise potential areas for future research.

The site and context for the study is a medium sized FE training provider based in the South East of England. To compare the experiences, views and perceptions of leaders, managers and teachers, interviews were carried out with leaders and managers who are accountable for ensuring equality legislation is adhered to, and with teachers who are responsible for complying with equality legislation. The fifteen interviewees who volunteered to take part in this research represent the various layers of the organisational

structure and different academic departments. In advance of the interviews, every participant was given a written description of the purpose of the research. One to six employees from each level of the organisation were interviewed. Teaching experience of the participants varied significantly and ranged from less than two years of experience to more than twenty years of experience in FE. It was decided to attain as wide a participant outlook as possible; however, the sample was restricted to fifteen participants to ensure meaningful interpretation.

Participants included one member of the Senior Leadership Team (referred to as Manager/Teacher in this study to assure anonymity) with responsibility for strategic leadership, five Team Leaders (referred to as Manager/Teacher in this study) responsible for operational management, three Programme Leaders (referred to as Programme Leader /Teacher in this study) responsible for leading the delivery of course programmes and six teachers responsible for teaching and assessing students. All Manager/Teachers have teaching experience and Programme Leader/Teacher participant responsibilities include teaching.

Semi-structured interviews were selected to enable the research participants to express their reality (Robson, 2002) and, as social actors, describe how they believed disability affects equality for teachers within FE sector more generally. The interview questions were designed to explore and understand how disability affects FE teachers in the widest possible sense. Sample interview questions included:

- 1) What are the key disability and equality issues for the provider and the FE sector?
- 2) What is your own experience in relation to.... disability?
- 3) How do disabilities affect equality for teachers within the provider and in FE?
- 4) How do specific learning disabilities affect teachers working for the provider and in FE?
- 5) How might leadership and management, within the provider and in FE, advance equality of opportunity for teachers with disabilities?

- 6) How might the provider demonstrate best practice in making reasonable adjustments for teachers, trainee teachers and teacher applicants?
- 7) What are the lessons that can be learned for the provider and for the FE sector?
- 8) Is there anything that you would like to add which I've not asked you, in relation to how disability may affect equality for teachers?

To gain a clearer understanding of disability disclosure issues, specific questions were also asked, such as: *Do you think teachers within the organisation who have a disability would disclose it?* Questions one and three were designed to provide a rich insight into how disability may affect equality for teachers in Further Education by drawing out the lived experiences of participants. Question four, on specific learning disabilities, was designed to build on the research carried out by several authors (see Riddick, 2003; Valle *et al.*, 2004; Riddick and English, 2006; Sanderson, 2011; McCusker, 2013; Kirby and Gibbon, 2018; O'Dwyer and Thorpe, 2013). Question five was designed to explore compliance with the 'Equality Duty' requirement, i.e. to advance equality of opportunity in the workplace (Equality Act, 2010). Question six was designed to gain insight into how the case organisation and other FE providers can demonstrate best practice in making 'reasonable adjustments'. Additionally, question six was designed to build on the work of Melling *et al.* (2011), Sanderson (2011), Kirby and Gibbon (2018) and Dibben *et al.* (2018).

It should be noted that the participant responses provided during interviews may have been influenced by the lead author's role as a senior leader within the case study organisation. To mitigate this risk, participants were promised anonymity and confidentiality. Information about the study was provided prior to the interview and a consent form was signed by all participants. This confirmed that participation was voluntary, and that interviewees could withdraw from the study at any time, without giving a reason. Interviews were held in a

private room in a discrete location to safeguard anonymity. Although a specific set of questions were asked to each participant, questions were used as a brief to encourage a conversation and were not strictly asked in the order listed. Participants were provided with a printed version of the questions to allow them to refer back to a previous question if they wanted to. Interviewees were reassured that each question was open to their interpretation and that their responses should be based on their lived experiences, views or observations. Out of respect for the richness of their contributions, all participants were awarded as much time as they wanted to spend on each question; the lead author was also careful to ensure that she followed their train of thought and they had nothing further to add, prior to moving on to the next question. It was particularly important for to listen intently, with empathy and respect for participants who spoke of their adverse experiences in relation to their own disability. Supplementary questions were asked to draw out information to gain deeper insight and understanding.

To ensure that data could be thoroughly analysed, each interview was audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim and stored securely. Data from the audio-recordings and transcripts were analysed using an open coding system to identify key themes and thematically selected codes and subheadings. Key themes and subthemes were then cross referenced and compared to the literature. Overarching themes in relation to disability disclosure are discussed as subheadings in the findings section of this article. The overarching themes and ideas discussed are supported by a selection of participant quotations, and through an assimilated discussion of findings centred on the literature. For the data analysis, we drew upon Fairclough's (1989) description of critical discourse analysis, examining the ways in which participants spoke about other peoples' presuppositions about disability within their narratives. For example, we scrutinised the way in which participants spoke of others' beliefs about disability. In particular, we paid close attention to commonly used words, emphasis

placed on words, tone of voice, facial expressions and body language as a means of understanding perceptions of disability and equality. Words such as *'fear'*, *'fearful'*, *'frightened'*, *'scared'*, *'scary'*, *'hiding'* and *'come out'* were frequently used in relation to disclosure. *'Stigma'* and *'taboo'* were used to explain why there is a need to raise awareness of disabilities and how to support them. *'Problem'*, *'issue'* and *'wrong'* were often used to describe disabilities, particularly learning disabilities. As the fieldwork and subsequent data analysis progressed, we also reflected upon the insights generated and the possible implications for further research.

**Findings**

***'Coming out' – the need for disclosure***

All participants believed that there was a need for disability disclosure in order for the needs of an individual to be fully met; fourteen out of the fifteen participants suggested that teachers with a disability should be encouraged to disclose. Despite the perception that the case organisation was more supportive than other FE providers, the majority of participants didn't think a teacher would disclose a disability; no participants believed a teacher would disclose a mental health disability. Notwithstanding, several participants (approximately half) interviewed for this study said they have a disability. Table 1 shows the number and percentage of participants with each disability type. Three participants disclosed more than one type of disability.

**Table 1. Disabilities disclosed by participants**

Participants	No.	%
Total number of participants	15	100%
Participants who disclosed a disability	7	47%
Participants who disclosed more than one type of disability	3	20%
Participants who disclosed a physical disability	4	27%
Participants who disclosed a 'hidden' physical disability	3	20%
Participants who disclosed a 'hidden' learning disability	4	27%
Participants who disclosed more than one learning disability	1	7%
Participants who disclosed a 'hidden' mental health disability	2	13%

Despite these findings, some participants said they were not aware of any teachers in the organisation with a disability. The most common type of disability disclosed by participants was the specific learning disability, dyslexia. Four participants disclosed dyslexia, yet none of the fifteen participants knew of more than one or two teachers at the case organisation who have disclosed a learning disability and some participants were not aware of any teachers within the case organisation with a learning disability. Three of the four teachers with a learning disability were not aware of any other teachers within the case organisation with a learning disability.

Teachers with a learning disability describe disclosure as a '*big step*' and it is clear from participant responses that disclosure is an extremely difficult, emotional decision that teachers contemplate carefully and view as perilous. Participants frequently used the words '*come out*' when referring to disclosure of learning disabilities and mental health disabilities. Rodis et al. (2001) and Delpit (2001) propose that individuals with learning disabilities compare their experience of disclosure to that of '*coming out*' for a person who is gay. Valle et al. (2004) describes '*coming out*' as learning disabled as an act of trust. They used the

metaphor of *'the closet'* to draw links between the experiences of individuals categorised as learning disabled and the experiences of those who are gay, i.e. in relation to weighing up the dangers and potential benefits of *'coming out'* (ibid). Interestingly, in the current study, the term *'come out'* was primarily used by Manager/Teachers and Programme Leader/Teachers to describe disclosure for teachers with learning disabilities. The recurrent use of the term *'come out'* signifies that disclosing a learning disability may be similar to disclosing a difference in sexuality, or a change in gender:

*"This is the first time I've been able to 'come out'..."* (Teacher B);

*"But I think other teachers will ... 'come out' if...."* (Programme Leader C);

*"One or two people have 'come out' to say..."* (Manager/Teacher C);

*"So if teachers could 'come out'...."* (Manager/Teacher F)

Despite significant differences in age, teaching experience and length of service at the case organisation, all teachers with a learning disability demonstrated discomfort, anxiety and distress when speaking about their own personal and professional experiences:

*"When I was at secondary school it - they made you feel like you was thick or you were stupid. And I just thought, well, I'm just thick. I'm not bright."* (Teacher B);



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2  
3 *"It's [my own experience has] been pretty poor. God, I feel quite upset now. I think*  
4 *it's because well...I was just thinking of school, it just felt really emotional then."*

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6  
7  
8 (Teacher D);  
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10  
11  
12 *"I've lost a couple of jobs in the past and that's been very, very distressing."*

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14  
15 (Teacher F)  
16  
17  
18

19 It is clear from the findings in the current study that regardless of the disability type,  
20 disclosing a disability is emotionally difficult. For those with a disability, talking about it  
21 was not easy, even if they had already disclosed:  
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28 *"Although [the case organisation] know, it kind of makes me nervous. I do get*  
29 *nervous about it. (Teacher B);*  
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34  
35 *"I'm very anxious to even say it... [that I have a learning disability]"*

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37  
38 (Teacher C);  
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42 *"When I did get the diagnosis, for two weeks I couldn't even talk about it."*

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44  
45 (Manager/Teacher E)  
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49 Participants with a physical disability, whether 'hidden' or not, spoke of disclosing shortly  
50 after diagnosis, whereas, the time it took for teachers with a learning disability to disclose  
51 varied significantly; it appeared unrelated to age and teaching experience.  
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Valle et al. (2004) suggest that dominant discourses of 'ableism' silence people with a disability, helping to perpetuate a world in which they are marginalised. Due to the perception of disability as deficit, to be 'out' as disabled is to be exposed, i.e. different from the average person. Consequently, it is unsurprising that many teachers with a disability may choose to remain silent. Paradoxically, this silence perpetuates a sense of shame and stigmatisation:

*"They don't want to be seen as – I can't manage my job or I'm incompetent to carry out my role so they tend to just keep that [their disability] silent instead of seeking help."* (Teacher E);

*"For me, I believe that the issue is people themselves feeling ashamed...."*

(Programme Leader A)

Most participants who disclosed a disability to their line-manager did so with trepidation. 86% of participants with a 'hidden' disability expressed a desire to keep their disability confidential. Regardless of their disability type, participants who had disclosed to HR or their line-manager, felt that information about their disability should be shared strictly on a 'need to know' basis. For this reason, disclosure to a line manager does not necessarily unveil a disability to all colleagues:

*"Some people, like myself, I'd rather keep that [my disability] confidential and I feel that only those that need to know should know."* (Programme Leader/Teacher A)

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2  
3 Whilst managers should keep all personal information confidential, some participants  
4  
5 recognised that over-confidentiality reduces the likelihood of other teachers disclosing; thus,  
6  
7 perpetuating the notion that having a disability is somehow embarrassing or shameful.  
8  
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### 10 11 12 ***Disability is perceived as a 'deficit'*** 13

14 With the 'deficit perception' psychological literature in mind, and discussed earlier (e.g.  
15  
16 Valle *et al.*, 2004; Holwerda *et al.*, 2012), it is unsurprising that many teachers perceived  
17  
18 their disability as a personal problem to be combatted, rather than a difference to be  
19  
20 accommodated and celebrated:  
21  
22

23  
24  
25  
26 *"I didn't know I had a problem [a disability]. I didn't tell them [the employer] that I*  
27  
28 *had the problem [the disability]."* (Teacher B)  
29  
30

31 It is clear from the findings in the current study that having a learning disability can lead to  
32  
33 low self-esteem and a lack of confidence, due to the deficit perception of disability:  
34  
35  
36  
37

38 *"We always want to be the best at something. To have a learning disability you kind*  
39  
40 *of feel inferior to other people."* (Teacher C)  
41  
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44

45 Through the words they used, emphasis placed on certain words, facial expressions and body  
46  
47 language, all four teachers with a learning disability demonstrated discomfort, anxiety,  
48  
49 sadness and distress when asked about their own experiences in relation to disability and  
50  
51 equality. It was clear from the narratives of teachers with a disability that their decision to  
52  
53 disclose, or not, was closely linked to their past experiences and their perception of disability  
54  
55 as a deficit. One teacher compared the way he/she had been treated to sexism and racism, and  
56  
57 became tearful when asked about their own experience in relation to disability and equality:  
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60

1  
2  
3 *"It's like any 'ism' around. At the end of the day, it obviously does impact on lives.*

4  
5  
6 *We can talk about sexism, we can talk about racism, it's no different."* (Teacher D)

7  
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9  
10 The word *'hiding'* was used by many participants when discussing disability  
11 disclosure and equality. The language used can sometimes suggest that teachers with a  
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13  
14 *'hidden'* disability are intentionally hiding their disability; possibly because they are worried  
15 about how they will be perceived by others, if/when they eventually disclose. Sanderson  
16 (2011) found that the disability dyslexia is frequently concealed by employees. Pelkey (2001)  
17 suggests that individuals with a learning disability often hide their disability, simply because  
18 they are ashamed. O'Dwyer and Thorpe (2013) also suggest that teachers may hide a  
19 disability due to fear, shame or perceived negative consequences. These explanations are  
20 also in keeping with the findings from our study.

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31 Another reason for non-disclosure may be that teachers think their condition is not  
32 debilitating enough, i.e. to warrant mentioning. For example, having lived with a health  
33 condition since early childhood, Manager/Teacher B didn't initially regard his/her health  
34 condition as a true disability:

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38  
39  
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41  
42 *"I don't feel it [my disability] affects my work."* (Manager/Teacher B)

43  
44  
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46  
47 However, as the level of discomfort and pain slowly increased, Manager/Teacher B became  
48 mentally distracted from normal daily work tasks. Only then, did he/she begin to realise this  
49 health condition was genuinely debilitating:

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51  
52  
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56 *"I find that I'm distracted mentally from anything that I'm doing because I'm so*  
57  
58 *focused on either the pain or the discomfort that I'm feeling."* (Manager/Teacher B)

## Discussion

Due to negative perceptions about disabilities and the fear of adverse consequences (i.e. P1a & P1b), we suggest it is very unlikely that most FE teachers will disclose a disability. In a survey of workers with disabilities, von Schrader et al. (2014) found that almost a quarter of those who disclosed a disability had experienced long-term negative repercussions. In the current study, the vast majority of participants indicated that it is likely that there are teachers who have a disability, yet have not disclosed, due to stigma and fear of possible repercussions. For example, some participants with a learning disability expressed concerns over how they would be perceived by others, due to: (a) the stigma attached to having learning disabilities; (b) discrimination at the recruitment stage; (c) failure to pass their probation; (d) lack of promotion, or worst of all; (e) fear of job loss.

In the current study, some teachers didn't declare their disability on job application forms; and if they did disclose later, it was after they passed their probationary period. There was a fear amongst teachers with a learning disability that if they declare their disability on their job application form, they will not be offered the role:

*"When it gets that bit about disability, do I tick it? No, I'm not going to tick it because then I have to explain it or if I tick it I might not get the job."* (Teacher B)

Whilst all participants agree that disability disclosure is necessary in order for the individual needs of a teacher to be met, the question remains as to whether disclosure actually improves the general lot of teachers with a disability. There is a dearth of literature concerning teachers and trainees who didn't disclose their disability(s), due to fears of not being accepted or being marginalised (Macleod and Cebula, 2009; Singleton, 1999; Riddick, 2003). Findings from this study indicated that two out of four teachers who disclosed a

learning disability later regretted their decision to disclose. One teacher said that if they left the current case organisation, he/she would not disclose their learning disability to a new employer, due to the experiences they had with the current case organisation:

*“I don’t know if I was to ever leave [the case organisation] and go somewhere else, would I let them know that [I have a disability]? I don’t think I would. I think I’d keep it to myself to be quite honest. I don’t think I’d feel I could tell.”* (Teacher B)

It is clear from the findings of this study that disclosure has not provided all teachers with the support and resources they expected. Whilst participants with a physical disability felt well supported with the resources and adjustments provided, two out of four teachers with a learning disability felt that they had to fight for their resources, and that support was not forthcoming. Participants with a learning disability spoke of a heightened level of anxiety following disclosure due to how they believed other staff, leaders and managers would perceive them, and due to not having received the adjustments and support they required. One participant stated he/she was aware of a teacher who had disclosed to HR, and that this same teacher was thinking of quitting, or reducing their hours because they couldn’t ‘cope’.

*“The particular individual is thinking of either quitting or reducing the hours because they can’t cope.”* (Manager/Teacher F)

In the current study, three out of four teachers with a learning disability expressed fear of not gaining contractual employment, and not passing their probation. Following disclosure to their line-manger, anxiety around job security and lack of promotion remained or increased for these three teachers. Two out of four of teachers who disclosed a learning disability stated

they couldn't progress because of disclosing; one said that if he/she left the organisation and started to work elsewhere, there would be no further disclosure. Other reasons expressed by participants for non-disclosure included the fear that they wouldn't be believed, and also a concern that they would be viewed as incompetent.

Whilst the data suggests that teachers fear disclosure due to perceptions held about disabilities and lived experiences, participants feel that teachers with a 'hidden' disability are unlikely to disclose because they are unaware of other teachers with hidden disabilities, and as a result they choose not to disclose because they do not feel safe. The general consensus of participants is, that if teachers with a disability would 'come out' and act as role models, champions or ambassadors, other teachers with a disability would feel more confident to disclose as well. Nonetheless, participants alluded to a lack of trust and indicated that teachers may not feel safe to disclose because they are afraid of adverse consequences:

*"Even when I was in university it was something that you were told - do not go to your GP if you're struggling just in case it's on your record that you've been given depression tablets."* (Teacher E)

Participants with a learning disability who have already disclosed their disability continue to feel anxiety in relation to how they believe they are perceived and in relation to job security. Valle et al. (2004) suggest that teacher education programmes usually frame disability within the traditional deficit-based medical model, thus reducing the overall likelihood of disclosure for teachers with a disability.

Kirby and Gibbon (2018) refer to 'positive' disclosure as a skill which they describe as knowing when and to whom to disclose. Through this description, they acknowledge that disclosure is a risk that requires careful consideration. Findings from the current study



indicated that disclosure is not a one-off event, but rather an ongoing, never ending progress. Valle et al. (2004) also conclude that disclosing a learning disability is not a distinct occasion, but rather a personal journey that is influenced by a number of aspects, and rarely without completion.

**Concluding Remarks**

In terms of the ‘*what should I say to my employer... if anything?*’ dilemma alluded to in the article title, it is clear from the findings that regardless of age, experience or duration of employment, FE teachers are unlikely to disclose a disability; particularly those with a learning disability, or mental health disability – *thus supporting the interlinked proposition(s) P1a and P1b*. Whilst most teachers with a disability felt well supported by their line-manager and believed that their organisation was doing more than other FE providers, there was also a definite desire to raise awareness of disabilities and to celebrate the positive advantages that teachers with a disability bring to the organisation. For those staff with learning disabilities, contemplating disability disclosure is not an isolated event (Valle *et al.*, 2004); rather, a never ending process that can generate significant fear, uneasiness and anxiety that may remain indefinitely throughout one’s employment term, or even career lifetime. Teachers within the case organisation who disclosed their learning disability to their line-manager often felt ‘*overwhelmed*’, ‘*anxious*’ and ‘*tired*’, despite having disclosed in the proper way – *thus P2a and P2b cannot realistically be supported at this time*.

Work-place reactions to initial disclosure can also influence a teacher’s decision to disclose a disability again in the future. As long as disability disclosure is perceived in ‘*deficit*’ terms, then personal fears and employee anxieties are likely to remain. Another interesting finding was that none of the teachers who disclosed a learning disability had ever

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2  
3 been promoted. It is also clear that teachers with a disability were less likely to apply for  
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5 promotion due to perceptions of disability being perceived as a deficit, and of course, the  
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7 potential adverse impact on the teacher's self-esteem and overall levels of confidence.  
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10 For the FE sector as a whole, employers need to reflect on their current work culture  
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12 and levels of staff disability support in relation to: (a) teacher recruitment and promotion; (b)  
13  
14 observation of teaching, and; (c) student learning and assessment processes. Employers need  
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16 to critically evaluate whether their existing work processes, systems and targets discriminate  
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18 (albeit unintentionally) against teachers with a hidden disability. School/college leaders and  
19  
20 managers need to eliminate, or significantly reduce the disadvantages suffered by teachers  
21  
22 due to disability and encourage those teachers to apply for leadership and management roles.  
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26 In terms of research limitations, this is only a single (organisational) case study, and  
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28 so the findings and propositions relating to (P1a, P1b) and (P2a, P2b) cannot be considered  
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30 generalisable at this time; certainly not without further mixed methods research (including  
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32 survey-work) in other regions of the UK. The research ideas discussed in this article could be  
33  
34 extended to the UK higher education (HE) sector, where there are arguably similar staff  
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36 concerns around sickness, disclosure and disability management. Future larger scale  
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38 (empirical) research could also explore how human resource practitioners, teaching assistants  
39  
40 and support staff, react to and regard teachers/lecturers with a learning disability. Finally,  
41  
42 further research could also investigate the potential benefits of employing teachers/lecturers  
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44 with a disability (Fullick, 2008). For example, participants in this study believed that  
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46 teachers with a disability were better able to identify and support those students with a  
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48 learning disability.  
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